
THE CELEBRATION OF PENANCE AND FORGIVENESS IN OUR DIOCESE (1)



On May 2, 2002, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II published an apostolic letter called *Misericordia Dei*, on certain aspects of the celebration of the sacrament of penance. In the letter the Holy Father encourages the world's bishops and priests to give a new impetus to the sacrament of reconciliation by reminding them that all the faithful with the inner disposition required have the right to personally receive the sacramental grace. In our diocese, for close to thirty years a continuous effort has been made to help the People of God better understand the grace of this great sacrament, and to regularly participate in penance and reconciliation celebrations.

MERCY AS A LEGACY

All of Holy Scripture witnesses to the fact that our God is a God of mercy. Even more than the title "all powerful," we rightly call our God "all merciful." The Psalms present the Lord as "God of kindness and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in love and kindness." Perhaps more than any other, the Evangelist Saint Luke gave us a Gospel of Mercy. All we have to do to be convinced is to read the three great parables he gives us: about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the "prodigal son," that is, of the lost child who finds a prodigal father! Let us take the time to read over again the writings of Saint Paul, especially what he says in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus, concerning God's plan: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Paul affirms that God is rich in mercy, that He gives us in a very special way the unfathomable riches of Christ's mystery. He also affirms that we are given the power to understand with all the saints the breadth and length, the height and depth of the love of Christ.

"BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS!"

It is in this context of mercy that we are called to relearn about the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Go and learn the meaning of the word: It is mercy that I want, and not sacrifice; indeed, I have not come to call the just but the sinners." We must relearn this sacrament of mercy by replacing it within Jesus' and his disciples' ministry of evangelisation. Immediately following his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus went to Galilee to proclaim God's Good News in these words: "The time has come and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the Good News." It is the same discourse that the Apostle Peter had for those who had experienced the Pentecost event and who asked what they should do: "Repent, and be baptised each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Every great apostolic discourse ends with a call to repentance, and it is in reference to baptism that the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is made known to us. On the first Easter evening, Jesus showed himself to his disciples with a greeting of peace: "The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. He said to them again: 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so do I send you.' And he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whoever you shall forgive, their sins shall be forgiven, and whoever you do not forgive, their sins shall not be forgiven'."

SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS

Among the 1987-1990 Diocesan Synod recommendations there were the following, dealing with the sacrament of forgiveness: "That there be time set aside for individual confession on weekends and in preparation for the major feasts; that priests be always available for private confession upon request; that during Advent and Lent and other special occasions such as parish missions, etc., there always be a well-prepared community celebration of penance with proper teaching, to help people recover the sense of the sacrament of forgiveness in their lives" (Recommendation 83 a), b), c), French Sector). [The English Sector recommendation was: "That at community celebrations of reconciliation, opportunity be provided for... individual... absolution" (Recommendation 61, English Sector).] From what I know of life in our diocese, these practices are still being

applied in all our parishes, and I thank all the priests and those who assist them for making this renewal of the sacrament of penance come about. I remember well the pastoral session we had with Father Raymond Vaillancourt. We must pursue our efforts, and I ask those in charge of our parishes to offer to our people the time for private confession as well as for community celebrations of reconciliation, especially during Advent and Lent, and parish missions. We must more than ever celebrate personally and as a community the infinite mercy of God. With our pastoral experience of over twenty years, may we continue to offer our communities special times for the celebration of penance and forgiveness; through singing, psalms, meditation and reflection, may we prepare ourselves to live every aspect of the sacrament of penance.

THE WITNESS OF TRADITION

In last May's apostolic letter, Pope John Paul II restated the Church's traditional teaching: "Individual and integral confession and absolution are the sole ordinary means by which the faithful, conscious of grave sin, are reconciled with God and the Church; only physical and moral impossibility excuses from such confession, in which case reconciliation can be obtained in other ways... Since the faithful are obliged to confess, according to the kind and number, all grave sins committed after Baptism of which they are conscious after careful examination and which have not yet been directly remitted by the Church's power of the keys, nor acknowledged in individual confession, any practice which restricts confession to a generic accusation of sin or of only one or two sins judged to be more important is to be reprobated. Indeed, in view of the fact that all the faithful are called to holiness, it is recommended that they confess venial sins also. In light and within the framework of the above norms, the absolution of a number of penitents at once without previous confession, as envisaged in Can. 691 of the Code of Canon Law, is to be correctly understood and administered. Such absolution is in fact exceptional in character and cannot be imparted in a general manner..." I shall return to this point in my next message.

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